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Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650-1800 by Ruth Bloch and Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature by Paul Downes.

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Book Reviews

***Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650–1800.* By Ruth H. Bloch. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press. 2003. x, 225 pp. Cloth, \$55.00; paper, \$21.95.**

***Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature.* By Paul Downes. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press. 2002. xii, 239 pp. \$55.00.**

The recent flurry of transatlantic scholarship would seem to have resituated early American studies in a trans- or postnational context. Yet in the eye of the storm, two recent books defy this new critical trend. Firmly focused on cultural developments in the post-Revolutionary United States, Ruth Bloch and Paul Downes both argue for the importance of previously overlooked factors for subject formation and early nationalism in the new republic. Seeking to (re)introduce the concepts of gender and monarchism into the equation, Bloch and Downes rely on readings of literary and legal texts as well as other eighteenth-century cultural practices. Though different in methodology and theoretical underpinnings, these studies engage many of the same issues and pose similar interventions in the field.

Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture is a collection of Bloch's articles written from 1978 to 1994, arranged as chapters, with the addition of two previously unpublished pieces. Despite this unusual format, all the chapters cohere beautifully around the premise of "the overwhelming symbolic significance of gender and family as sites of both individual identity formation and collective socialization" (1). Bloch is more interested in broad religious and economic developments than in national histories; therefore, she discusses the origins of nineteenth-century, white, middle-class views of gender by looking back to colonial developments and, even further, to changes in the position of women brought about by the Reformation. Though Bloch's sweeping view of gender and gender roles from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century is perhaps overly general, it effectively introduces and informs her argument about the early United States.

Methodologically, Bloch objects to the hegemony of Marxist and material-

ist theories in women's studies, advocating instead a "culturalist" approach in which gender is seen as a symbolic quality that is "at least as much about interconnectedness as [it is] about power" (40). Bloch's first chapter offers an incisive critique of prevailing trends in feminist theory, including psychoanalysis and poststructuralism. Her own counter—or culturalist—approach is perhaps better explained by the ensuing readings than the foundational belief that "gender is embedded in wider systems of meaning" (40). Some of Bloch's chapters ("American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785–1815" and "Republican Virtue: The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America") are already classics of the critical canon. Others, in particular chapters 4 and 8, that concentrate on the public-private dichotomy are equally insightful.

In chapter 4, Bloch considers the ways in which colonial courtship laws influenced and prescribed an increasingly private process. Seventeenth-century American laws punished fornication, elopement, and courtship without prior consent of the father or the master much more severely than did English laws, thus reinforcing patriarchy and asserting parental control over the emotional attachments of children (81). The practice of suing for breach of promise or for seduction also became particularly popular in early America. Bloch's readings of eighteenth-century trial manuscripts reveal the ascendancy of sentimentalist ideology in the judges' verdicts and their open expression of sympathy for the female victim, especially in the case of one Clarissa Harlowe Boynton (no joke). Bloch convincingly argues that such cases show "the influence upon the law of wider cultural changes in the understanding of gender" (101), thereby demonstrating the effectiveness of her culturalist approach. All Bloch's chapters are worthwhile and, together, they form an excellent collection that is greater than the sum of its parts.

In *Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature*, which won the 2003 MLA prize for a first book, Paul Downes argues that monarchism was not only an oppositional defining force but also a persistent characteristic of revolutionary ideology and early American democratic discourse. He sets out to prove that "displaced or translated elements of monarchic political culture can be found at work in key revolutionary ideas and constructs" (5) by reading the works of Crèvecoeur, Brockden Brown, and Irving. Though Downes shares part of his textual corpus with Bloch (most notably Benjamin Franklin's autobiography), their studies differ in methodology and focus. Downes repeatedly cites the political theories of Ernesto Laclau and seems to accept the hermeneutics of deconstruction. He does not fully articulate his interpretative paradigm, however, and at times the citations of Derrida seem obfuscating or simply out of context. Downes's introductory explanations of revolutionary time and grammar and the link between sovereignty and substitution are nevertheless very well formulated.

The first (and best) chapter in the book considers the ritualized executions

of effigies of George III in 1776. Downes suggests that because the American revolutionaries were unable to physically kill their King, they killed him metaphorically, in repeated staged performances of regicide. The meaning of this spectacle depends on a shared acknowledgement of the symbolic power vested in a material representation of the king's body. The revolutionaries tried to subvert "the king's privileged relationship to the order of the metaphor" (42) in order to create a new economy of power between the political subject and the material signifier. In a reading heavily influenced by Michael Warner's work, Downes claims that the brand-new Americans went on to construct their political subjectivity not on the hieroglyph but on the alphabetic sign. This chapter offers many excellent interpretations of race, patriarchy, and materiality in the context of the mock executions, and Downes succeeds in tying together a wide variety of texts to prove the residual influence of monarchism on American democratic subjectivity.

However, not all of Downes's chapters are equally convincing. His cursory consideration of Irving, for example, does nothing to strengthen his argument, which can be difficult to follow because of his fragmentary and foreshortened style. Also, the choice of texts seems to reveal a particular penchant for the dead white men, which goes unexplained. Fortunately, his afterword on Cooper's *The Spy* incorporates the previous interpretations into the bigger, monarchical picture. Like Bloch's book, Downes's study presents a valuable new reading of American Revolutionary culture, and it stands as an example of the important work that remains to be done within the confines of American studies and the geographical boundaries of the United States.

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The Artistry of Anger: Black and White Women's Literature in America, 1820–1860.

By Linda M. Grasso. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press. 2002. xi, 249 pp. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$18.95.

The Language of War: Literature and Culture in the U.S. from the Civil War through World War II. By James Dawes. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press. 2002. viii, 308 pp. \$39.95.

Despite this nation's revolutionary beginnings, literary criticism has generally failed to recognize the centrality of violence and dissent to U.S. culture. Violence occasionally consumes Hawthorne's dream worlds, rage crystallizes in the figure of Ahab or is transferred onto rebellious slaves, and the United States has had to address its destruction of indigenous populations and the violence and aftermath of the Civil War. Nonetheless, such violent literary and historical interludes seldom disrupt the tight, well-ordered composition of U.S. nationalism. But in a terror-obsessed present where violence has moved